

### **New Black Hills Forest Service Funding to Fight Pine Beetles is a Smart Investment By Stephanie Herseth Sandlin**

On September 30<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. Forest Service announced the welcome news that it would immediately provide \$2 million in new funding to fight the mountain pine beetle outbreak in the Black Hills. I've consistently advocated for an aggressive and proactive approach to addressing the mountain pine beetle outbreak that includes providing our federal forest managers with the resources and tools necessary to meet this growing challenge, and was very pleased to receive this news.

These funds will allow the Forest Service to perform increased thinning treatments and other important forest management activities, which will slow the advance of the outbreak, helping to protect local Black Hills communities and preserve the forest for future generations. In addition to improving forest health, these funds will also support jobs in rural areas.

Despite Forest Service attention and action, current outbreaks of mountain pine beetles continue to pose great threats to the Black Hills National Forest and communities that rely on it. These outbreaks are the largest and most intense in recorded history, affecting an estimated 356,000 acres of ponderosa pine in the last 13 years. The spread of the epidemic is now accelerating at a dangerous pace, with beetle infested trees showing up in new areas throughout the forest. This epidemic has created the potential for catastrophic fires that threaten communities, forests, watersheds, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and local tourism industries, inhibiting job growth and economic recovery. As you may know, the Mt. Rushmore National Monument recently announced that, for the second year in a row, the traditional Independence Day fireworks celebration will not be held because of concern about wildfire danger caused by nearby trees that have been killed by mountain pine beetles.

Smart and targeted investments in forest management, like this new federal funding recently

allocated to the Black Hills, will save much greater costs in future if the epidemic is not adequately addressed. In nearby Colorado and other states ravaged by mountain pine beetles, estimates of the cost to mitigate the threats to public safety now range in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Investments in the Black Hills are particularly cost-effective because we're fortunate to have a functioning timber industry that is able to perform the necessary work on the forest to combat the beetle outbreak.

The strength of our Black Hills timber industry came through clearly when I hosted USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment Jay Jensen, for a visit to the Black Hills National Forest in August, and was also noted by Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell during my recent meeting with him in Washington. Deputy Under Secretary Jensen oversees the Forest Service, and during his visit to South Dakota in August, I took him on an aerial tour over the Black Hills to view the damage done to the forest by the pine beetle infestation. We also met with representatives from local communities and the forest resource industry. I believe that he was not only impressed by the scope of problem, but also by the level of community involvement in issues affecting the health of the Black Hills National Forest.

In September, I followed up and called on the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Forest Service and the White House to use the resources provided to them by Congress to provide emergency assistance and eliminate bureaucracy in the effort to fight the mountain pine beetle epidemic in the Black Hills. I also requested a greater allocation of resources to fight pine beetles next year. The increase of \$2 million in funding from the Forest Service that followed these requests recognizes the need for more action in South Dakota, and I'm hopeful the Forest Service will provide increased funding to fight pine beetles in the coming year as well.

My work on this topic is ongoing, and I will continue to work with local communities, and state, local, and federal officials to make progress. You may visit my website at [www.hersethsandlin.gov](http://www.hersethsandlin.gov) to stay updated on what is being done to improve our ability to combat the pine beetle infestation. As we continue to search for solutions, I look forward to your input as I travel around the state.

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